

## Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*

---

CHANDRIKA B.

**T**he Refugee is a one-act play written by Asif Currimbhoy against the political upheaving in East Pakistan in 1971. Currimbhoy is quick with his dramatic reflexes to events around him. During 1971 there was an influx of Bangladesh refugees into India and the same year saw the writing of *The Refugee*. Some critics have grouped it along with Currimbhoy's *Inquilab* and *Sonar Bangla*, written in 1970 and 1972 respectively, and called the group 'The Bengal Trilogy'. The themes of *The Refugee* and *Sonar Bangla* are connected with the problems of Bangladesh but that of *Inquilab* is the Naxalite revolt which disturbed West Bengal in the '60s. Unlike Western trilogies like *The Oresteia* or *The Wesker Trilogy* or *Mourning Becomes Electra*, these three plays do not have a common theme or common characters, so it is a disputable issue whether the three can be grouped together. For the present study I propose to take *The Refugee* as an independent one-act play.

The plot centres round Yassin, a young intellectual, who flees to India from East Pakistan after having miraculously escaped the machine guns at the notorious 'intellectual massacre' of university scholars by the Pakistani military ruler Yahya Khan. He is welcomed to the household of Sen Gupta, who himself was a refugee 24 years earlier and had been the childhood friend of Yassin's mother Rukaiya. Sen Gupta looks back with nostalgia upon his home town of Comilla in East Bengal and cherishes sweet memories of Rukaiya, his young love, though he is now the father of two children—Mita and Ashok. He is genuinely touched by the sad plight of the East Bengalis and his family shares his sympathy. But as days go by the number of refugees swells—they occupy the open fields, idle sewerage pipes, and even Sen Gupta's garage. Sen Gupta's idealism wanes and now he looks upon the refugees as a threat to his own home and community. But strangely enough, Yassin remains unperturbed. He occupies Sen Gupta's study, goes for his new job at the university regularly, and does not even talk about his home or the refugees outside. Sen Gupta's son Ashok joins the Mukti Foj, for "someone has to do the fighting" when able-bodied men from East Bengal choose to remain indifferent and noncommittal. Ramul, the leader of the bunch of refugees outside, appears to be intended as a foil to Yassin, who seems to be happy in his cosy room and job, and seems to have been forgotten the fact that he was once a refugee. Mita, Sen Gupta's daughter, who actively associates herself with refugee-rehabilitation programmes, accuses Yassin of deliberately avoiding the refugees as if they did not even exist. Life to her means involvement and action. Her confrontation makes

Yassin restless and disturbed. He overhears Sen Gupta saying that the refugees' exodus is an undeclared war by Pakistan and that to protect the Hindus who are being persecuted and driven out India must declare war upon Pakistan. Yassin protests against this. He is a Muslim and still a Pakistani and so his loyalties are with Pakistan. Mita's announcement that cholera has broken out in the refugee camps disturbs Yassin. At night, in the company of Prof. Mosin, he goes to the refugee camp for the first time "to look for his conscience" as Mita suggested. They watch Ramul conducting a trial and passing a sentence of death. Yassin interferes and the prisoner is set free. Ramul hints that they are all doomed to death:

Release the prisoner. Let him roam. Give him enough rope: he'll hang himself. [p. 32]

Everything seems a nightmare to Yassin, who loses the distinction between reality and non-reality. Later in the night he goes to the refugee camp again, all alone. He helps a young woman bury her dead mother and tells her to pray for his salvation. He comes back home and packs up to leave for his home town. He has a bitter confrontation with Prof. Mosin who is worried about the Indian Muslims whose position in India is endangered by the Pakistani Muslims. He bids farewell to Mita who has helped him to find himself and who, he assures her, will remain his ideal across the border just as his mother had been for her father. He takes away Ashok's Mukti Foj uniform and leaves the house still unsure whether he is doing the right thing.

To lay bare the horrors of social reality Currimbhoy has chosen the dramatic form of the one-act play—and has provided infinite riches in a little room. But he does not confine his play to one little room, for this one-act play has five scenes, all set in different places and different times. Thus it gives the effect of a full-fledged play of five acts, with a lot of action. In fact it is more in the tradition of the well-made play popularized by the French playwrights Eugene Scribe and Victorien Sardou. Here in *The Refugee* we can see all the characteristics of a full-fledged well-made play, consisting of exposition, rising action, climax, denouement and conclusion, and also other ingredients like melodramatic situations, high-flown dialogue, etc. The first scene is expository in nature, establishing the background and introducing almost all the characters. The action slowly mounts to a climax—to Mita's hysterical outburst, rousing and inspiring Yassin to shake off his indolence and search for his conscience (Scene III). In Scene IV the denouement begins, and the play comes to a conclusion when Yassin leaves the Sen Gupta household. Mita's melodramatic announcement of the outbreak of cholera and her hysterical speech link Currimbhoy with his well-made-play models from the West:

Mita (uncontrolled voice): Cholera! Cholera's broken out in the refugee camp!  
(*Subconsciously everybody looks accusingly, apprehensively, at Yassin, as though he who personifies the refugees brought it in. Yassin flushes, feeling guilty and oppressed once again, without knowing why, without being able to escape his identity, the indelible stamp of the unwanted refugee.*)

Yassin (inadvertently bursting out): I... I had the cholera shot on crossing... (he stops, realizes, feels acutely embarrassed.)

Wife (*softly*): Nobody meant you, Yassin... (*But of course everybody did look at him.*)

Mita (*continues*): Refugees dying... like flies. Disease... spreading... (*breathless*) Trying hard... to contain it. Much sympathy... from outsiders. (*Looking straight at Yassin, the tears at last streaming down her face*) They say... at last... (*laughing and crying hysterically*)... the conscience of the world is aroused. At last, in crisis. The conscience. THE CONSCIENCE. What a word, oh my God, what a meaning. Don't tell me it escaped us all along. The morality of it all. Here we are talking about politics and rescue and refugees and war and even taking sides. It is not the lack of commitment that matters, it's the lack of morality that does. And we must... both aggressor and giver of shelter... search for our own conscience. (*Silence and darkness*)

The scene smacks of over-theatricality; a woman talking at length in an emotional rhetoric, with tears streaming over her face, is a really melodramatic figure. Yassin's second visit to the refugee camp is also intended to create a sensation among the spectators when in the eerie moonlight Yassin digs the grave to bury the mother of an unknown refugee girl.

The dramatic system of Asif Currimbhoy is the system of parallels and contrasts. In *The Refugee* every character is a parallel and a contrast to the others. Yassin and Sen Gupta are both erstwhile refugees, but they differ in their attitudes to life and demeanour; both cherish the ideal across the border symbolized by Yassin's mother and Sen Gupta's daughter. Yassin and Ramul are refugees, but their ways are entirely different—one closes his eyes to the problem and leads his own comfortable life while the other immerses himself in the problem and reigns supreme in the world of the refugees. Yassin and Prof. Mosin are both Muslims—but the contrast is made evident in the last scene when one identifies himself with the Pakistani Muslim and the other with the Indian Muslim. The active rebellious children of Sen Gupta are contrasted against Yassin who is happy in his shell. One can even detect the unconscious contrast implied between Rukaiya, Sen Gupta's ideal of love, and Sarla, his own wife.

Through these parallels and contrasts each character grows and evolves. The skill with which Asif Currimbhoy traces the subtle change that comes over the characters reveals him as a playwright of great psychological skill. For instance, let us examine Sen Gupta. He is full of sympathy for the refugees at the beginning of the play when he welcomes Yassin into the house:

You're welcome. As friends and neighbours you're *all* welcome. As long as there is enough room to live in and food to share, I promise you *there will always be shelter in this town for those who need our help*. Many of us came here uprooted after partition, settled down, worked hard, built proudly our own positions in life, but not without a sense of responsibility and social purpose. What we do is equally for you... as for ourselves. [p. 7. Emphasis added.]

But when the refugees increase in number and occupy even his garage, Sen Gupta's idealism starts waning. He even talks of sealing the borders. He even expresses his irritation at having to harbour Bengali Muslims—but checks himself as Yassin is in his study. As Sen Gupta slowly dissociates himself from his ideals, his children become more and more idealistic and committed. Sen Gupta is angry to see the Hindus being driven out of East Pakistan:

If this pressure keeps up and the hordes of Hindu refugees grow, how much longer will we in India remain secular? [p. 26]

He calls Yassin "traitor" when the latter declares himself to be a Pakistani. But Yassin tells him that he must be allowed freedom of thought and action even though he is a refugee in Sen Gupta's house.

Yassin, another instance of a character in whom a psychological change takes place as the play progresses, is handled by Currimbhoy in a different manner. Unlike Sen Gupta, Yassin is a 'closed' character, happy in his withdrawal from society and its problems, an introvert pleased to be in his comfortable shell. Mita stirs his mind into restlessness and the scene ends with our conviction that Yassin's character would undergo a change. But the language and style adopted by Mita is far from being convincing:

Oh Yassin, Yassin, touch me! Can't you see I'm a human being? Can't you see I'm real? Aren't you moved? (*She touches his face tenderly.*) The refugees exist the same way; they're alive and only too real. They bring tears to my eyes, their suffering touches my heart. I can't bear to leave them alone. [p. 22]

Then Yassin goes to the refugee camp at night and watches Ramul, their leader in action, condemning another refugee to death. Currimbhoy explicitly suggests that there is something surrealistic about Ramul, but this goes unnoticed in spite of the suggestion, and the dialogue between the characters. When Ramul mentions someone dying of a broken heart, Yassin, who has stated earlier that his mother had died of a broken heart, seems to lose his mental balance for a minute and attacks Ramul. Yassin's second visit to the camp the same night is equally melodramatic, as pointed out earlier. His leaving Sen Gupta's house is a logical step in the evolution of his character, but the means employed by the playwright to achieve this does not seem to be justified. However, Yassin's mental inertia is perhaps well-justified as belonging to university intellectuals for whom scholarship is an end in itself.

Ramul, the 'king' of the refugees who governs from his sewer-pipe throne, is a half-eccentric character but more responsible and realistic than Yassin. He seems to be originally intended as a foil to Yassin, but he develops an identity of his own. His very first appearance is striking—in the literal sense. In the refugee camp which is full of "skeletoned men and sunken-eyed babies sucking on to shrivelled breasts", we hear Ramul's "eerie baboon-like mad laugh" from the sewer-pipe; and then he "jumps out like a horrendous monkey", crying out:

Madness... and madness... madness...

[p. 12]

A very sober realist, Ramul knows that the initial warmth and welcome for the refugees would end soon, that people would want them to be out of sight, and that millions of unwanted refugees would then have nowhere to go. He appoints himself leader of the refugees and asks them to occupy the school building and Sen Gupta's garage. Soon he sets up field units, intelligence divisions, etc. in his own mad way.

Some people visit him, asking for his help to create trouble in the country, for they do not want the law-and-order problems in India to be solved. Ramul bursts into hysterical laughter and the men, convinced that he is mad and irresponsible, leave. Ramul comes out with a telling comment:

You see . . . We're not altogether unwanted.

[p. 21]

In the trial scene, Ramul talks about protecting the Hindu refugees and, "taking a leaf out of the Yahya book", sentences a Muslim refugee to death. Yassin confronts him and in the dialogue that follows Currimbhoy seems to deliberately switch over to the absurd style which is reminiscent of Stanley being interrogated by Goldberg and McCann in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

Ramul : What have you done since you've come here?

Yassin : N...Nothing.

Ramul : How do we know you're not a Pakistani spy?

Yassin : I'm not.

Ramul : But *might* you be...without knowing it.

Yassin : Meaning.

Ramul : "They also serve who stand and wait."

Yassin : But I have't harmed anyone.

Ramul : Depends on how long you do nothing.

Yassin : What do you mean?

Ramul : You negate life.

Yassin : And then?

Ramul : You become guilty through default. (*then with soft unexpectedness*) It's like someone dying of a broken heart. And not being buried. (*Yassin cries out and grabs the man by the throat with unexpected strength and ferociousness.*) [pp. 31-32]

The prisoner is set free, for Ramul knows that given a long rope he will commit suicide. The absurdity of the scene is complete when Ramul declares that they were just playing a game.

Currimbhoy is careful to leave in the heart of almost every character a handful of dreams or memories where he can take refuge when haunted by everyday reality. Sweet fragrant memories of Rukaiya make life worth living for Sen Gupta:

On a clear night, heavy with the scent of *mahua* flowers and my own loneliness, I can feel the presence . . . of the past (*turns around and faces Yassin*). You see why we're one. The East Bengali, whether Muslim or Hindu, always yearns for his old home town. [p. 3]

Yassin has no such fond memories, only painful ones—of his mother Rukaiya who died of a broken heart; but he is soon to find his ideal across the border in Mita, Sen Gupta's daughter. His last words to her resemble Sen Gupta's:

... the night is deep, the longings are far, and one evening in the loneliness of my study room in Comilla, heavy with the scent of flowers and memory, I shall dream of you. [p. 34]

Currimbhoy employs such romantic language when he tries to depict the inner feelings of his characters. It becomes ironic when Ramul uses it at times:

The night is dark, and there are no shadows. It is then that I appear, to soothe your pain, to search for my distressed soul that can no longer distinguish between good and evil... (*then prancing like a joker, spreading his arms wide*) Ahhh... what a large expanding family I have... [p. 18]

The mock-serious tone employed here makes the dialogue border on absurdity. Asif Currimbhoy has been criticized as a wordy playwright mainly because of his excessive use of dialogue. But his descriptions of the Sen Gupta household and the refugee camp are picturesque. The way Yassin recalls the 'intellectual massacre' is also vivid and descriptive. It is to the credit of Currimbhoy that he is able to adopt subtle variations in tone and style in the dialogue as the mood of the character varies, though the over-use of ellipses seems to be unnecessary.

Currimbhoy's plays are often characterized as documentaries, for he fails to project the ideological implications in the plays. But in *The Refugee* it is ideological conflict that forms the subtext of the play. The ideologies may not be explicitly stated, but Currimbhoy traces the conflict in the individuals between the forces of narrow nationalism and humanism (Sen Gupta's inborn conflict), between different factions within the same religion (Yassin-Mosin), and between the beliefs of different generations (Sen Gupta and his children). Each character, except those of the younger generation, fluctuates in belief and adjusts his ideology to suit his or her needs. Yassin could retreat to his comfortable den without taking sides, without getting involved. But how long can an individual live in society non-committally? Yassin is dragged back and plunged headlong into action. Sen Gupta, full of the milk of human kindness for the refugees, finds his idealism waning when faced with practical problems. Prof. Mosin, so eager to help his Muslim brother from across the border, changes his stance when he finds the position of the Indian Muslim in jeopardy. This play is not a documentary on the refugee-rehabilitation programme, it is really a projection of the ideological conflicts in various individuals.

Another criticism levelled against Currimbhoy is that he never reveals his standpoint in his plays regarding the particular historical event dramatized. Before one attempts to examine this question, one has to reflect on the medium through which the playwright transmits his views. The critical practice of branding any one character as the mouthpiece of the author facilitates this kind of assessment. But the question is whether such assessment on the part of the critic or such revelation on the part of the playwright is at all necessary in a play. Currimbhoy seems to have taken an objective stand which, to the present writer at least, appears to be commendable. In every play by Samuel Beckett, one need not look for a Beckettian character; one character in every play by Pinter is not necessarily Pinteresque. Plain dramatic propaganda as in Bernard Shaw may not have much social relevance now.

It is however true that Currimbhoy succumbs to the temptation to yield to melodrama, as the instances pointed out earlier prove. He overemploys dialogue. Bayapa Reddy's opinion that the language in Currimbhoy's plays helps the Indian spectator to identify himself with the characters may not be fully applicable to *The Refugee*. Sometimes the dialogue gives the effect of being strained or artificial. For instance, in the first scene of the play, Yassin and Sen Gupta talk:

Yassin : The Refugee...  
 Sen Gupta : ... Ah...  
 Yassin : ...leaves against his will...  
 Sen Gupta : ... true...  
 Yassin : ... in bitterness.  
 Sen Gupta : (softly) It depends on what he makes out of his life. His new home.  
 Yassin : (unsure): Meaning? [pp. 3-4]

It is a typical passage that illustrates Currimbhoy's overuse of ellipses and the strained nature of the dialogue that prevents it from becoming truly authentic. □

### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### A. Primary Sources

Plays by Asif Currimbhoy

*The Doldrums*. Bombay: Soraya, 1960.

*The Dumb Dancer*. Bombay: Soraya, 1961.

*The Tourist Mecca and The Clock*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961.

*Three Plays: The Doldrums, The Dumb Dancer and Om*. Bombay: Soraya, 1962.

Goa. Calcutta: Oxford & I.B.H., 1964; Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1970.

*The Hungry Ones*. Bombay: Soraya, 1965; Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1977.

*An Experiment with Truth*. Bombay: Soraya, 1969; Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1972.

*Inquilab*. Calcutta: Oxford & I.B.H., 1970; Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1971.

"Darjeeling Tea?" Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1971.

*The Refugee*. Calcutta: Oxford & I.B.H., 1971; Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1971.

*Sonar Bangla*. Calcutta: Oxford & I.B.H., 1972; Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1972.

Plays: Goa, *Inquilab*, *The Doldrums*, *The Refugee*, "Darjeeling Tea?" and *Sonar Bangla*. Calcutta: Oxford & I.B.H., 1972.

*Om Mane Padme Hum!* Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1972.

*The Miracle Seed*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1973.

*The Dissident MLA*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1974.

*This Alien...Native Land*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1975.

#### B. Secondary Sources

1. Books and Articles on Asif Currimbhoy

Bowers, Faubion. *The World of Asif Currimbhoy*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop.

Bhatt, A.K. 'A Theatre Journalism', *The Indian P.E.N.* (12 Dec. 1974) 1-4.

Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. 'The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy', *Indo-English Literature*, ed. K.K. Sharma. Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1977.

Patil, V.P. 'A Playwright Speaks', *Span*, 11, 4 (April 1970) 16-19.



Reddy, Bayapa, P. *The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy*. Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1985.

2. Books on Indian Drama in English

Anand, Mulk Raj. *The Indian Theatre*. London: Dennis Dobson, 1950.

Benegal, Som. *A Panorama of Theatre in India*. New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1967.

Bhatta, S. Krishna. *Indian English Drama: A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1987.

Gowda, Anniah, ed. *Indian Drama*. Mysore: Prasara, 1974.

Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa ed. *Drama in Modern India and the Writers' Responsibility in a Rapidly Changing World*. Bombay: The P.E.N. All India Centre, 1961.

Naik, M.K. and Mokashi-Punekar, S. ed. *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*. Madras: O.U.P., 1977.

Sharma, K.K. ed. *Indo-English Literature*. Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1977.